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Online Editor: Laura Garrison

Production Editor: Samuel Snoek-Brown

Associate Editor: Monica Rodriguez

Readers: Rebecca Vaccaro, Amanda Chiado

Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

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## **Table of Contents:**

<b>Editor's Note</b>	3
<b>When the Bees Came, Abbey Kos</b>	4
<b>Sue Nguyen Sees No Ghosts, Brandon Barrett</b>	6
<b>No One Died on the Moon, Keely Cutts</b>	10
<b>Our Lady of Fire, Laura Hogan</b>	14
<b>Loveteeth, Kathryn Michael McMahon</b>	16

## Editor's Note

It's September, which always fills us with back-to-school spirit and nostalgic memories for glitter gel pens and those little scented erasers shaped like fruit. There's no mood more literary than this, so we're pleased to present five speculative stories for your required reading list. Abbey Kos fondly recounts "When the Bees Came" in an elegant flash piece, and Brandon Barrett explores a girl's unusual problem in "Sue Nguyen Sees No Ghosts." The title "No One Died on the Moon" is not actually much of a spoiler for Keely Cutts' sci-fi tale of loneliness, nor does "Our Lady of Fire" do more than hint at the terror churning beneath the surface of Laura Hogan's haunting short. Finally, Kathryn Michael McMahon shares the story of a sympathetic shark and his comely human chum in "Loveteeth."

— Laura Garrison

# When the Bees Came

Abbey Kos

When the bees came they chose Harpa because it looked like home. People think of honeycomb as yellow, but it doesn't start out that way: virgin wax is clear as windows. It only darkens after worker bees eat it and sick it out, eat it and sick it out.

The first time I saw them I laughed. You know I'm afraid of regular ones, but there's something about a five-meter bee that just gets me. You can see how clumsy they are, how gentle. Their stingers could cleave someone in half, but it turns out humans are too small to threaten them. They mostly just ignore us.

I was there the day the bees showed up. One moment there was Reykjavik like I knew it, and then there were these noises, low and high, blending, tuneless. (It was the buzz, of course, the sound of their wings.) And then we saw them at the horizon, rising like old gods.

I laughed, but everyone else screamed. There was a lot of running. People like to say the bees blackened the sky that day, but I was there and the swarm was really only a thousand or so. There's no need to be hyperbolic about things.

They headed straight for Harpa like they knew it was there, and watching them take that place was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Every window was the right size and shape for a brood cell, so the bees just started building up and out. Within two months Harpa was swallowed. It became something new, something organic and strange.

Nowadays people hardly notice the bees anymore. We harvest their body heat to warm our homes. We export honey and candles. And in spring we take our children to Harpa—we can still get through the doors, you know—to watch life growing on the other side of the windows. We say to them, look: an egg the size of a globe, a grub as big as you. We say to them, listen: God did not make this world just for you and me.

**ABBIE KOS** is a writer and editor living in London. She was raised in Ohio and attended Hiram College and the London School of Economics. Her work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *The Daily Meal*, and *Jezebel*.

# Sue Nguyen Sees No Ghosts

Brandon Barrett

Sue Nguyen told me she's an anomaly in her family. They'd immigrated to San Francisco from Vietnam by way of Singapore. Mother, Father, Anh (later to call herself Sue), sister Diu, Grandmother, and maternal Aunt, all bunched atop each other in a dismal apartment across the street from the deli where Father worked. A hand-to-mouth existence, it would seem, but the real tragedy in Sue's life was that she saw no ghosts.

The female lineage had been seeing ghosts for generations. Decades of ghosts in the alleys of Hue, later soaring in the skies above Singapore, splashing in the ship's wake all across the Pacific, skulking about the San Francisco tenement. Grandmother was a particularly accomplished communicator with apparitions, conversing at length with Grandfather every evening, planning the details of tomorrow's activities. "I will make coffee, you will open the windows," she murmured. "I will wash the cups, you will bring the paper in."

Aunt specialized in the infamous: Ngo Dinh Diem came when Aunt called and would answer questions posed to him and was unable to lie, and once she asked Rasputin the secrets of his powers and then fell quiet and withdrew, refusing to speak for three days.

Mother, for the longest time, rarely saw ghosts—mostly quick takes of spectral cats traversing ceilings—until Father passed. At that point the gift blossomed thoroughly in her, and she was visited frequently by skeletal forms wearing white suits. It was not described whether Mother was a reader of Tom Wolfe. The

skeletons lived in the apartment in parallel with Mother, drank from wispy cups and slept in invisible beds.

Diu, two years older than Sue, was born simple and learned only rudimentary language, and from age five onwards directed her speech (incomprehensible babble and laughter) exclusively toward individuals not present, leading the family to conclude that Diu saw *only* ghosts.

But for Sue, not a glimpse. She confided to her father, one time only, her shame at this deficiency. He hugged her and whispered in her ear: *Don't you ever worry about it. You take after me.* And he looked at her for a while with love, smiled and seemed ready to cry, and started to say something else. But then Aunt passed through the room and squinted, and that was all he ever said about it. Anyway he died a few weeks later.

With Father gone, her deficit became ever more apparent. It never seemed that Father outright disapproved of discussing the talent, but following his passing the phenomenon shifted from the periphery of their lives right onto center stage. Grandfather's spirit was now joining them at the dinner table, which he'd never done before. Franklin Roosevelt—via Maternal Aunt—dominated an entire night's conversation with his postmortem views on the role of modern Vietnam on the world stage. Even Diu's incessant garble seemed more insistent, awakening the family at night with outbursts of shrieking horror and laughter, alternating in the same breath. And Sue spent less time at home—a place increasingly frenetic with the activity of ghosts she could not see—and more time reading at the library or sitting in the park late into the evening.

Time passed. Sue started high school and found a niche for herself in the world of home economics, cakes and quilting and whatnot, even going so far as to join an unofficial, unfunded Homemakers Club. She'd been invited by a nice pudgy girl named Emily who was timid and shrinking in the way of nice pudgy fourteen-year-old girls the world over, and whom Sue would thank in the dedication of her first cookbook years later. Emily was her first friend, and there was initially a soul-wrenching confusion as to whether Emily was a lesbian or not, or for that matter whether Sue was a lesbian or not. It's unclear if this ever worked itself out.

Sue and Emily walked to the bus stop from the Homemakers meeting one evening, which had consisted of five adolescent girls deciding that virginity until marriage was a good idea, and Tracy was going to report back as to how *vichyssoise* is pronounced. They said little on their walk, but finally Emily asked where Sue lived, and offered that she'd like to come by sometime, if that was okay, and they could make some brownies or something, if Sue wanted, or if not then that would be fine too. And Sue said, *Yeah, maybe, I'll let you know*, and jumped on the first bus that came by and went fifteen minutes in the wrong direction and cried and wasn't sure why.

She got home late. The front door was locked and nobody answered, although there was a fair amount of racket from inside. She fumbled for her key and pushed the door open. Diu was rocking on the ground in the living room, pointing at the ceiling and screaming nonsense, syllables drawn out to the very end of her breath. Grandmother paced from the living room into the kitchen and back, looking over her shoulder and crying in Vietnamese: *It was your fault, you were never home, what was I supposed to do?*

Maternal Aunt was scribbling on the living room wall with a pen, stopping every few moments to cock her head and listen for instructions. Mother, unable to live with the ghosts any longer, had slit her wrists hours prior and bled out in the corner of the kitchen.

Sue stood in front of her mother, blood spreading out underneath the body like a shawl, maybe like the one Sue had sewn last week and given to Emily as a gesture of who-knows-what-exactly. Mother's eyes were open. Grandmother passed by behind Sue every ten seconds, brushing up against her. Sue's first coherent thought was: *maybe now I will see Mother's ghost*. The passage of time has not borne this out.

**BRANDON BARRETT** is a practicing cardiologist, originally from the Oregon and now living in rural Virginia with his wife and son, writing in his spare time. He has been published in the *Literary Review*.

# No One Died on the Moon

Keely Cutts

Helena dreamed of her teeth falling out again. She woke with the lingering panic of crumbled molars and sharp-edged enamel cutting against her tongue. In the cold of space, she expected nightmares about the endless abyss or burning up under the unprotected sun, not speaking around the remnants of her mother's hard-earned smile.

With sleep no longer appealing, she got up and checked her messages. A new shipment of supplies was due in the middle of the day cycle. Command wanted an update on the excavation of B site. Her father rambled for ten minutes before his cat walked across the console and ended the feed. A host of ads and offers tempted the rest of her reading, a holdover from when she could have fresh fruit or pedicures. Thirty-six people lived on the moon. No company shipped to them and they were thin on services.

In her tiny bathroom, she programed the shower to shut off halfway through her one-minute allocation of water. She tossed her clothes behind the door, where they used to make Em crazy in their shared apartment off Dupont in DC. The impersonal, medical-quality soap slid over her brown skin before she flicked the switch for the water, counting through each second.

At ten seconds the soap was gone. At fifteen she cupped her hands into a well and poured the water over her face. Twenty seconds and she closed her eyes. What was it like to breathe fresh air? To feel the touch of another.

The water cut off five seconds early while she was still in the

midst of walking hand in hand under spring-snow cherry blossoms. She jerked at the interruption and pounded on the wall with her fist, a wordless rage caught in her throat as she was denied her momentary escape.

At her workstation, her screen was stuck loading for half an hour, and when it came online, it wouldn't respond to her touch. The shipment arrived. Helena bent her head close to the panel to monitor touchdown and felt a hot breath wisp across the back of her neck. She turned.

Jenkins was eating at his station, spreading debris in a five-foot arc.

"Quit it."

"What?" Crumbs fell from his slack mouth as he looked genuinely confused.

Half an hour later, Jenkins complained of a headache, then dizziness and left before the end of his shift. Typical of his work ethic and their relative isolation. He was replaced by Martinez, the slim blonde scientist from Nevada who wanted to be friends. Their usual conversation was stunted when Martinez asked Helena to repeat her question, but Helena had said nothing at all.

Helena took her time walking through the narrow corridors of the base after her shift. Someone—maybe one of the first colonists—had tried painting familiar landscapes on the slate gray walls, but the paint pitted and peeled. In a common area, she read digital copies of Dr. Seuss for their bright pictures and short sentences. At

dinner, the mess was empty, but she still felt like she was being watched.

When Helena thought about the Moon colonies she was promised as a child, she imagined bright, open glass domes filled with little dome houses and Astroturf lawns. Like the suburban neighborhoods she saw on television with her mom late at night when neither one of them could sleep because the gas was shut off again.

Colonists were meant to stay through the end of their contract. Helena's was a five-year stretch, just the break she was looking for after Em packed up a single suitcase of clothes and headed West for some artist commune. Just twenty-three months in, Helena understood why so many colonists went home early, or got sent home.

Her mom's mom used to talk about spirits that walked the halls of her childhood home, the sure and steady presence of the dead lingering among the living. Helena never put much stock in those stories; Grandma Pam was old, and things were different back then. When books fell off shelves or doors creaked, it was the settling of the house, nothing more.

In her three-by-three shower she had thirty seconds of peace, as the roar of the water washed out the moans of the metal base and the shuffle of footsteps that couldn't be there. When she entered her main room, the bed was turned down, though she'd left it made. Had she carried the spirits with her as she launched from Earth? Perhaps there was something else with them on the lunar surface. Or maybe she was tired and it was time to go home.

**KEELY CUTTS** holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Rosemont College and has work published in *Front Porch Review*, *Crack the Spine* and *Inaccurate Realities*. Originally from Florida, she now lives in suburban Philadelphia with her wife.

# Our Lady of Fire

Laura Hogan

Every day they adorn this desk with stones smooth and polished, medium and small, the size of my palm or the roof of my mouth. At five o'clock they collect my rocks in a bucket and put them in a drawer. There is a man in the break room stirring glass cleaner into his coffee. He says his cup is stained. There are sixteen black and white photocopied portraits of Jesus on the walls of his cubicle. Security escorts him to the fountain in the courtyard, and I pound on the glass, afraid they will drown him for offending the Pharaoh. He gets away, he runs, his picture is posted in reception.

On Thursdays they collect bleating lambs and small goats for sacrifice on the game show stage. I see them gathering in the morning. There is a sign that says we will be poisoned to our daughter's daughters. *Chemicals in this Garage are known to the State of California to cause Cancer and Reproductive Harm.*

Parking is difficult on Thursdays. The game show people arrive at the appointed time but there is something wrong with them. It's the mingling of generations. The old and the young can bring water from the well, mash the beans, weave the cloth, but they cannot operate the elevator. The wise ones are weighed down by purses, keys, and hats. Their feet are hobbled. They mill outside the elevator mewling and counting the young ones. They lose track and have to start over. They push the button again.

When the doors close, the smallest one is left behind. He looks up at me, afraid he has done something wrong. He's afraid I'll sacrifice him, but I keep my knife from his soft throat, the color of

buttermilk. There are signs in the elevator for people who can't read. A stick figure of a man descending the stairs chased by flame.

The acolytes wear navy blue blazers. They have clipboards and headsets, and they herd my goats before me. The stragglers are chased by golf carts and forced behind a barrier made of rope. I wave my arms and shout to scatter them, but they won't run. I knock down one of the blue blazers and rip down the barrier.

"Run away! Run away!"

They look sad and they bleat. "We're from Chicago," they say. "We're on vacation."

The blue blazer is getting up. He raises his hands above his head and the people still to listen. "Is anyone else here from Chicago?" he yells.

The people clap and hoot.

Maybe I can save just one. I chose an elderly man because he looks like he might be hollow inside. I pick him up and try to carry him away, but he gets too heavy. When I put him down he toddles back behind the rope.

Security is coming to take me to the fountain.

**LAURA HOGAN** has an MFA from the University of California at Irvine. Her short fiction has appeared in a number of literary journals including *Binacle*, *Lullwater Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *Zone 3*, and *Willard & Maple*.

## Loveteeth

Kathryn Michael McMahon

The great white who bit the salt-and-pepper-haired man on the foot would soon come to regret this impulse. The man flailed in the water and his wife watched, marveling at how he had managed to spill cranberry juice all over the breakers. Someone got out his phone to film it and she shouted at him, shouted for help, and smacked his phone into the sand. Some strangers came and risked their own lives, they would tell the news reporter, *their own lives*, and limbs, she would add, and they pulled the man out. An ambulance took him to the hospital. The man received a bionic foot with incredible sensors. The news reporter who had interviewed the strangers who'd risked their lives (and limbs) also did a follow-up with the man with the bionic foot. He told her he wondered whose idea it was to allow him to feel the gravel on the driveway. The news reporter surprised herself when she gave him her number. Their affair lasted two months until the heat of it collapsed upon its discovery.

Too angry thinking about the great white, the bionic man's wife had not noticed the news reporter hit on her husband. Then she was culling mutilated socks from her husband's drawer and she found a receipt bearing inky-blue, ultra-feminine numerals. Her husband blamed the affair on his foot and she blamed it on the shark. Neither blamed it on the reporter because she wore stage makeup and they agreed she must've been lonely.

The cheater's wife decided on a course of divorce and revenge. She first learned to steer a boat and throw a harpoon, but that

didn't feel dangerous enough. She then learned to scuba dive, but disliked the mechanical octopus on her back. She turned to free diving and spearfishing. She knew she had made the right decision when she could stay underwater for ten minutes, twirling her hair like a mermaid, a mermaid years younger.

The great white who'd bitten the mermaid-woman's husband felt guilty for her pain. When he told himself he'd thought the man was a seal, he was lying; he just hadn't liked the way he'd talked to her and then chatted up the Spring Breakers half his age. The shark wanted to apologize, but her spear gun made him nervous.

An ex-wife celebrated her first alimony check with a cranberry cocktail and a rental right on the beach. Though small and rundown, it was all she needed to swim and twirl whenever she wanted. She bought a silicone tail, blue and green, that went over her hips, past the appendicitis scar and stretchmarks. Her spear gun grew dusty on the shelf and she finally sold it on Craigslist.

The woman bought books and learned about mollusks and starfish and the difference between male and female horseshoe crabs (size, the female is longer). She swam past the breakers, splashing into the unknown. The long arcs of her arms grew strong while her fingers pruned to pits.

The shark watched her twirling hair like seaweed and learned that she liked to swim every day at seven a.m., except in the rain. She was not afraid of a little rain, he later found out, but she knew sharks like him were drawn to the chaos of fresh and salt. Even though he liked her new tail and that she didn't carry a spear gun anymore, he still felt uncertain about approaching her, so he watched her from the depths where the pressure matched his heart.

One day when he could bear it no more, he swam up with his

best smile and said, "I'm sorry." He was so nervous, he forgot to breathe.

The woman by now had realized that a shark was not to blame for her husband's cheating capabilities. "You should've bitten him higher up."

The great white had started sinking, but at her answer, he shot to the surface and breached, which cleared the beaches for weeks.

No one had ever leaped for her before, so when he asked if she wanted a ride, she said yes. She gripped his dorsal fin, and the denticles of his skin felt like a freshly trimmed beard. He was big—three times her size—yet he taught her to hunt from the depths with stealth. But he never dove too deep because he knew even though she was strong, she was still just a mammal.

She soon gave up wearing her tail, preferring the kick of her legs. They began swimming together every day, even in the rain, because with him, no one bothered her, and besides, they both liked how rain made them feel safe and alive. She missed him during thunderstorms and after the skies cleared, she would wade back into the water, looking for him with his broad, white belly just as he looked for her with her twirling algae-hair. When they found each other, she would greet him with a kiss to his nose, where the nerves were sensitive, and he tingled all over.

One day, she splashed up to him and she'd cut off almost all her hair (it had started breaking apart in the saltwater). She was slipping away; no more tail, and the hair, he thought, was her last anchor to the sea, to him. "I wish you could stay down here longer. Can you get gills?"

The woman thought about what he was really asking, which might've been a tad soon, but the freedom of gills appealed to her,

and, anyway, her landlord had been slow about fixing the leak in her roof. So she said, "That's a great idea."

She went home, fingertips eroded into canyons, and looked on the internet for "best local plastic surgeon" and made an appointment for a consultation.

When the receptionist told the plastic surgeon that his two o'clock wanted chest work done, he was not surprised, because even though it was boring, it was his bread and butter. But when the pretty woman came in, he furrowed his brow. She carried herself with a severity that did not normally accompany a woman trying to pump her chest full of self-esteem.

"What can I do for you?"

She pointed to her ribs. "I would like to get gills."

The surgeon almost dropped his clipboard. He'd heard of patients wanting O-cup breasts and fewer toes and even cat whiskers, but this was new. "Why?"

"I want to be a mermaid."

He looked at her face that caught the sun and kept it and he agreed, knowing she would make him famous.

The woman who would be a mermaid returned to the sea and found her shark. "It's going to take six months before I can go back in the ocean. They need to re-route blood vessels and add a special coating to my lungs."

All he heard was, "Six months."

"It'll be over before you know it." She pet his nose and he was a sea sponge in her hands.

The surgery was long. In the black, she dreamed of fish flickering in sunlight, dancing for their own splendor.

During recovery, the surgeon came to check on her every day

and she began to look forward to the smell of his aftershave, which was not something she had ever smelled at the beach. Come to think of it, underwater she could never smell anything, anything at all.

Because she was not a cheater like her ex-husband, she decided to tell the shark they were through. She met him at high tide and he came right up to the shore, which cleared the beaches, except for her, kneeling in the sand.

Had six months come and gone so fast? "Are you ready?"

"No." She wanted children and adoption was not an option she felt comfortable with and, anyway, this was all for fun; it wouldn't've worked out between them.

She stood and clutched her chest because her new gills ached and he thought it was her heart, so he watched her go, kicking crests of sand in goodbye. She did not turn back.

She'd shot out of the ocean, breaching his trust, and then the tide left without him. He realized a few moments too late that watching her walk away had been a subconscious act of self-destruction. He struggled to breathe and the more he wriggled, the further he wedged himself into the sand. There was no one around to help; to risk their lives (or limbs), but when people returned the next day, they found a dead shark and said, "Cool," and took pictures with it. An enterprising man charged the town to get rid of the shark and he took out its teeth and cleaned them and dried them and sold them.

The plastic surgeon who had checked on the woman every day had done so because he wanted to avoid a lawsuit but also because he wondered what it would be like to make love to a woman who didn't have to use her mouth for breathing. He was glad she hadn't

asked for a tail because it would've probably killed her and if it hadn't, it would have definitely impeded the lovemaking. He discovered her kisses tasted of seawater, which was the first time she hadn't surprised him and he liked that she could do both.

She, too, enjoyed new surprises; her healed gills were erogenous zones in their own right. In his pool, she discovered a disconnect from air benefited *her*. Upside down, blood rushing to her head, she pushed into the side of his pool, rough and prickly, and thought of her shark until she thought of nothing but the crest of the wave starting in her toes.

The woman who would've been a mermaid did not return to the ocean much. The surgeon would've wanted to join her and she didn't want him losing a foot or worse. And her guilt repelled seawater.

Though the surgeon knew nothing of the shark, he knew she missed the sea. One day after stopping at the convenience store for more condoms (the receptionist had required his spare), he stopped at the souvenir shop next door and bought his mermaid a shark tooth pendant.

She wore it both because he had given it to her and because no sharks had recently cleared the beaches, so she knew it was her great white. She wore it between her breasts, sharp between soft, and once in a while it would scratch her. Then she'd stroke the serrations and examine her gills in the surgeon's full-length mirror and think of what would've, could've, never should've been.

**KATHRYN MICHAEL MCMAHON** writes literary and speculative fiction. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Subtopian*, *A cappella Zoo*, and *Apocrypha and Abstractions*. She is an American raised abroad and has found a home in Vietnam where she works as a preschool teacher. Sadly, this has failed to cure her phobia of stuffed animals.



## On the cover:

**“JAPANESE SNOWY  
OCTOBUNNY LULU,  
PORCELAIN DOLL”  
ShirrStone Shelter**

**SHIRRSTONE SHELTER** is a married couple of artists, Olga and Nikolay. Currently, they live and work to St.Petersburg, Russia, where they create a mobile sculpture (ball-jointed doll) from porcelain. All their dolls are only for adults collectors, with some degree of surrealism. The artists strive to create each doll conceptually, full of meaning and content. Through sculpture, plasticity, body language and moods of the dolls, the artists are trying to embody in their works notions about good and evil, truth and lies. Their work is available at [sssdolls.com](http://sssdolls.com).

